

Good Shabbos Everyone. This week we will discuss the power of prayer. Every Jew has the ability and obligation every day to speak to His creator through the vehicle of prayer. We learn of the obligation of prayer in our weekly parsha Mishpatim. As the verse states, "You shall worship Hashem..." (Shemos 23:25) From this verse, the Rambam derives the source of the mitzvah of daily prayer. (Hilchos Tefilah, 1,1)

Hashem hears our prayers, and if we are worthy, we answers our prayers also. As Dovid HaMelech tells us in Tehillim (Psalms) "Hashem is close to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon him sincerely." (145:18) The following amazing true story will help us be inspired to daven - to pray to Hashem with kavona - intent and with an understanding of the words we are saying.

His name was Siberiak. He was a short stocky man with a weathered look, as he spoke in front of a group of survivors who were like himself. They did not have much left of their own lives. The evil Germans and Russians, and years of loneliness had taken an immense toll, but the group gathered together occasionally to share their emotions.

And now it was his Siberiak's turn: I always thought that the most important thing in the world was money. After all, what could be more valuable than gold? That is, until I came to Siberia. Together with other prisoners, I was given the task of mining gold. We would work long hard days, sometimes up to 18 hours with little or no rest. Our sleeping quarters were horribly cramped and our food rations were minimal. But when I saw where we would be working, I was immediately overcome with a feeling of joy. Our group was going to be working in the gold mine. And although the slave labor was difficult I managed to bring along a small pouch in which I was able to smuggle out a few golden nuggets each day. One night as I was counting my bag of golden nuggets one of the inmates noticed what I was doing and burst out laughing. He called over some of his friends and enjoyed a hearty laugh. They mocked me and ridiculed my little pouch. "Don't you think we all could smuggle out golden nuggets? You fool, what value does a golden nugget have here in the cold abyss of Siberia?" It was at that moment that I realized that gold is not the most valuable thing in the world. At least not here in Siberia. What good could it bring me? The hunger pangs gnawed at my insides as I dreamt of a thick juicy slab of meat, something I had not tasted in years. That's it! I thought to myself. The most valuable thing in the world is not gold but good food to alleviate my hunger pangs. There could be nothing that is more valuable than that. And so the daily grind of finding food continued.

It was comical in a sad way that those glistening golden nuggets were no more valuable to me now than the dirt into which they were wedged. They were worth nothing to me. All I could think of was the gnawing hunger. Every moment of every day my thoughts were focused on food — until one of the passing guards walked by while he was smoking a cigarette. The smell of the cigarette wafted through the cold Siberian air and the aroma filled the surrounding area. All of a sudden my hunger pangs dissipated and the craving for a cigarette became my focal point. Nothing else mattered.

Food was something that lasted for a short while but a cigarette provided much more than that. There was something that was more meaningful about it. The calm feeling and relaxation it provided were significantly deeper than the food or gold that I had previously desired. But a cigarette was something that was more difficult to come by.

Although tobacco was readily available and fairly easy to obtain, the paper in which it needed to be wrapped was scarce. Even the guards had a tough time getting hold of the elusive paper. I now realized that the most important thing in the world was not gold or food or even tobacco: it was paper. For days I would look forward to the next opportunity to smoke and the feeling from those few moments would provide me with enough satisfaction for the next few days. And so it developed into a routine.

But one day I came across a Russian peasant from a neighboring village. The older man approached me and asked if I knew how to read. He explained that I appeared to be slightly more educated than the rest of the prisoners and he had a favor to ask of me.

His son, an officer in the Soviet Union's army, was stationed hundreds of kilometers away and would periodically send a letter to inform his father of how he was managing. "Recently another letter arrived and I need someone to read it for me. If you help me I will give you the envelope to use for wrapping the tobacco." I could hardly believe my good fortune. I figured that I could probably roll at least two or maybe even three cigarettes with the envelope he had. I assisted him with his letter and thanked him for his "gift." And then I took the letter back to the barracks where I slept. I removed a small pouch of tobacco and placed the envelope on the floor.

But just as I was about to empty the pouch into the envelope something caught my eye. I had to look closer to make sure that I was not dreaming. Lo and behold! In front of my eyes an envelope was made out of paper that had Hebrew lettering on it. I carefully read it and saw that the writing was words from davening - daily prayers.

I had not prayed in many years but I was familiar the prayers and fluent in my reading. I picked up the paper and carefully folded it into my pocket. In the camp, there was a man whom we called the "Rebbele." It's not that he was so learned but he was someone who kept track of when the Yamim Tovim were and so he was the closest thing we had to a rebbe. When I showed him my newfound treasure, he could not believe it. Here we were, thousands of miles from the closest semblance of Yiddishkeit (Judaism) and G-d had sent us, a page of a siddur - prayer book. We figured that if Hashem had not forgotten about us, then we should not forget Him.

So we began a minyan. It was certainly not conventional in any sense. We only had this one page of a siddur. At each tefillah the shaliach tzipbur (leader of prayer) would read from the envelope. Whether it was a Shacharis (morning prayers), Minchah (afternoon prayers), Maariv (evening prayers) or Shabbos and Yom Tov davening, the leader of prayer would stand up and read from the envelope. The formerly depressed inmates found strength and solace through this prayer gathering that I had helped organize. Watching the transformation of these poor wretched souls taking place was nothing short of a miracle.

The prisoners now walked around and conducted their daily lives with a sense of purpose. Their lives had meaning and for that they were forever grateful. And then one day it hit me. I had discovered the most valuable thing in the world. It was not gold nor was it food. It wasn't a cigarette or the paper it was rolled in. It was "Prayer." The ability for one to connect with his Creator for but a few moments a day was something invaluable.

But perhaps what was most incredible about the envelope was the prayers that it contained. To receive an envelope that was made from some recycled siddur page was in itself a miracle, but the prayers it contained were the timeliest and most potent messages we could have ever hoped for. The page began with the declaration from the paragraph in prayer beginning "Az Yashir:" with the words "Hashem yimloch le'olam va'ed — G-d will rule forever" And the small lettering on the page continued until the heartfelt plea found in middle of the prayer "Ahavah Rabbah." with the words "Avinu, Av HaRachaman, HaMeracheim, racheim aleinu — Our Father, our Compassionate Father, Who is merciful, have mercy on us!" (from TOUCHED BY A STORY p. 174, R. Yechiel Spero)

Hashem should help that our prayers be answered. Amen. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**